HOME STUDY

*written by **Jim Turner***

During the middle of the last century, *Arts & Architecture* magazine editor John Entenza struck upon an ingenious idea, the Case Study House program. His premise was simple: approach eight young architects and offer each of them the chance to design and construct modern, low-cost houses (for eight actual families) with industry-donated materials, the results of which would then be featured in *Arts & Architecture*. With the periodical's slant leaning heavily toward all aspects modern—arts, music, design, and literature—*A&A* was the ideal venue to editorialize the architects and their projects. Following completion, each of the Case Study Houses were to be filled with furniture chosen by the architect, the designer, and the furniture manufacturer—"either to the architect's specifications or under his supervision." The models were to be opened to the public for six to eight weeks and a tenancy report was to be completed to record the success of the house.

Today, Entenza's roster of architects reads as a "Who's Who" of mid-century modern design, although at the time most were not considered representative of American or even Californian residential design. With names like Charles and Ray Eames, Richard Neutra, Craig Ellwood, Pierre Koenig, and Eero Saarinen, it's hard to imagine the project not being well-received.

Elizabeth A.T. Smith, chief curator of the Museum of Contemporary Art in Chicago since 1999, (and former curator of the Museum of Contemporary Art in Los Angeles, an adjunct professor at the University of California, Los Angeles, and a published writer and lecturer), has authored the newly published book, *Case Study Houses* (Taschen). Almost as big as some of the houses on its pages, the book is filled with enough modern architecture to satisfy any mid-century aficionado. *Case Study Houses* could easily replace the bulk of a collector's books on mid-modern architecture to date. Gorgeously photographed by the period's premier photographer Julius Shulman, it's a virtual history of his work as well—at least from the years 1945 through 1966.

Jim Turner: You must be very pleased with your new book, *Case Study Houses*?

Elizabeth A.T. Smith: It certainly is monumental in size! And it's really nice to have included the reprints from the original (*Arts & Architecture*) magazine. It was really a great undertaking. Taschen first approached me to write an essay about four years ago. I think it took Peter Goessel a long time to do a lot of the research—tracking down credits for things, finding all the original photography. I think it will bring renewed attention to the Case Study Houses for sure.

You were obviously a fan of modern architecture already.

Well, yes. I have a background in mid-century modern architecture, and I was a curator for many years at the L.A. MoCA. I had organized the exhibition on the Case Study Houses in 1989, so that's where I really developed something of an expertise on the subject.

When the Case Study House program began, *Arts & Architecture* promised to open the houses to the public upon completion. What was the public's reaction?

In 1945 the first house design was published in the magazine. It took a little while for them to actually build a house. At that time, it was difficult to obtain materials—there were wartime building material shortages. I think it was in 1947 when the first house was built and opened to the public. From what I understand, the reactions were mixed. Those who knew a little something about modern architecture found them interesting, but the vast majority of the public who toured them were somewhat perplexed.

I'm sure it was shocking to see factory-type materials in a residential situation.

Exactly. The houses were small and seemed sparse and stripped down. I think they were not so readily embraced by a large sector of the public, but there were aficionados of modern architecture who did become patrons for modernists in L.A.

Were timing and lagging construction the biggest problems the program faced?

Those were big problems, because it made it difficult to sustain momentum for the program. The desire of John Entenza was to have a new house built every year, and that didn't always happen. He had to resort to measures like bringing houses into the program that hadn't initially been designed as Case Studies, even having some of the architects themselves serve as clients. He was even a client himself for one. I think he resorted to whatever measures he could to keep the momentum going and keep it in the public eye.

It was a brilliant idea for a magazine—you'd have stories for the next five years. But everyone knows about building construction...

It *never* goes the way you think it will go.

Did he convince manufacturers to donate the materials by promising editorial coverage?

I believe so, and they advertised their products extensively in the magazine.

How smart is that?

It was a big selling point for the manufacturers. So they did succeed in getting lots of donated fixtures, furniture—lots of things—which really did save in the costs of building these houses.

Entenza's idea for the program must have been influenced by similar programs in Europe in the late 1920s, and even the 1930s' World's Fairs.

He had to have been aware of the precedence. You're absolutely right. There were a number of things that had been done earlier in Europe and in the U.S. Actually, around the turn of the century, Frank Lloyd Wright designed houses for *Ladies Home Journal* magazine. In Europe during the 1920s, there was the Weissenhofsiedlung housing exhibition which Mies van der Rohe was involved with.

Were any of the Case Study houses more successful than others?

It sort of depends on how you define successful. The goal of the program was to develop prototypes for mass production. In that respect, none of the houses were ever mass-produced; they were really "one-of" examples. But, architecturally, they were brilliant successes. The Charles and Ray Eames House was one of the great houses of the nineteenth century. It's a monument. And then, of course, the Pierre Koenig House has become an icon, in part because of Julius Shulman's photographs of it.

Would a program like the Case Study Houses work today?

I think it would be very expensive, and I just don't know if it would succeed in the same way. There's such a higher awareness of design today. My impression is that many more people are in tune to modern and contemporary architecture now.

Is the surge in modern appreciation just a trend?

I hope it's not just a trend, but I have noticed in the last few years, whereas there was a strong focus on mid-century modernism, it is now shifting. The work of the '60s and '70s is now being appreciated, which it really wasn't ten or 15 years ago. The shift, or evolution, kind of parallels the evolution of our own times. It's so much about what seems really fresh at a particular moment. Things evolve as a reaction to what was of interest right before that. I see it as an evolution, but really strong examples of mid-century design will always remain important. FLAUNT